Ukraine

55-69 minutes

(march 2022) **Putin's Invasions**.

(You can also watch my video about this article)

First of all, it's not only Ukraine: the West is obsessed with Ukraine for obvious reasons, but Putin also invaded Kazakhstan one month before Ukraine and clearly he has invaded Belarus to stage the invasion of Ukraine and has no intention of leaving Belarus either. In both Belarus and Kazakhstan he originally sent troops to quell popular protests against their dictators. Then he demoted those dictators to little more than provincial governors.

Incidentally, Kazakhstan's system is an improved version of Putin's kleptocracy: more than half of Kazakhstan's wealth belongs to fewer than 200 individuals, notably the billionaire daughter Dinara of the late dictator Nazarbayev, while at the same time a KGB-style terror regime makes sure that ordinary people accept it. Just like the Russian oligarchs stash their wealth in the West, Kazakhs oligarchs use the services of Western financial capitalism (notably in London).

While nobody really knows what is going on in Putin's mind, here are some thoughts on the invasion of Ukraine.

- Putin claims that Ukraine was never a country: mostly true. (Skip this if you're not interested in Ukraine's history). Kiev, the current capital of Ukraine, lies in the center. At one point, during the Middle Ages, Kiev's kingdom was the largest state in Europe, but that was really the predecessor of Russia: southern and eastern Ukraine was controlled by "barbaric" tribes, and the Italian city-state of Genoa established trading posts along the Black Sea. After the Mongol invasion of the 13th century, Kiev's kingdom disintegrated. While Moscow was picking up the pieces of various small principalities (like Ruthenia and Novgorod) and the south (Crimea) was still controlled by Mongols, Ukraine's territory was occupied first by Lithuania and then by Poland, which eventually united. The first major war between Poland and the new state of Russia (as the Grand Duchy of Moscow was renamed in 1547) was about Ukraine: in 1654 an assembly of Ukrainian nobles and landowners declared the secession of Ukraine from Poland-Lithuania and demanded integration into Russia. In 1667 the peace treaty of Andrusovo split Ukraine between Poland (western Ukraine, including Galicia, where Lviv is) and Russia (eastern Ukraine, including Kiev, which is right in the middle). One century later, Russia fought a series of wars against Poland that resulted in three partitions of Poland: in 1772 Galicia was given to Austria and in 1793 Russia obtained western Ukraine. So most of Ukraine was now "united" within the Russian empire, except Galicia. Poland and Ukraine remained provinces of Russia until World War I. Ukraine was actually one of the causes of World War I. The Austrian Empire and the Russian Empire had been quarreling about the Balkans, and, being rivals, each supported rebellion in the part of Ukraine controlled by the other. There were Ukrainians who wanted Russia to invade Galicia, the only part of Ukraine not controlled by Russia, and there were Ukrainians who resented being occupied and colonized by Russia (Ukraine was the granary of Russia and in 1876 Russia had banned the Ukrainian language) and would have preferred to be under Austrian rule. World War I started after the assassination in 1914 of archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria by a Serbian nationalist. Russia sided with Serbia (as did France and Britain) while Germany and the Ottoman Empire sided with Austria. Some Ukrainians saw an opportunity to split Ukraine from Russia and formed a volunteer unit in the Austrian army. Unfortunately for them, the war went in the other direction: Russia quickly occupied Galicia and extended the ban on the Ukrainian language to that region. In 1914 Ukrainians suffered persecution from both sides: first the Austrians blamed Ukrainians for helping the Russians (despite the fact that many Ukrainians had fled to Vienna) and, while retreating, killed thousands of "Russian sympathizers",

and then the Russian invaders restored the anti-Ukrainian laws of the past and persecuted the leaders of the Ukrainian movement (and even arrested and deported the leader of the Catholic church). This didn't last because Austria regained Galicia a few months later. In 1917 the Russia revolution deposed the czar and installed a provisional government. What is generally known as the Russian revolution of October 1917 was actually a coup by Lenin that overthrew that government and started a civil war for the control of Russia. During those few months of 1917 before Lenin's coup, Ukraine was allowed quite a bit of autonomy: not only its language was tolerated, but several Ukrainian-nationalist organizations were born and a parliament was elected in Kiev. When Lenin seized power in Russia, this parliament declared the independence of Ukraine from Russia. Lenin's Bolsheviks didn't recognize the independence of Ukraine and invaded Ukraine. The Ukrainian parliament signed a peace treaty with Austria and Germany so that Austria and Germany intervened to protect Ukraine from Lenin's invasion. Germany turned out to be a double crosser and installed its own puppet government in Ukraine. Luckily for Ukraine, Germany and Austria lost the war, so that in 1918 the puppet government resigned and the Ukrainian parliament was in control again. Unfortunately for Ukraine, yet another country had plans over Galicia: Poland. War erupted in western Ukraine between Ukraine and Poland while at the same time Lenin's Bolsheviks were trying to invade eastern Ukraine. In 1919 World War I was over but the war (or wars) over Ukraine raged more ferocious than ever, with "whites" (the army of the overthrown Russian government) fighting "reds" (Lenin's Bolsheviks), both "whites" and "reds" fighting Ukrainians in the south and east, Poland fighting Ukrainians in the west, France invading Odessa, and Britain helping the "whites". Atrocities were committed by all sides. In particular, all armies killed Jews. Both reds and whites committed atrocities against Ukrainians, and the whites restored the anti-Ukranian laws wherever they took control. In 1919 Poland also invaded most of Lithuania and Belarus, and in 1920 briefly invaded Ukraine. The Bolsheviks had largely defeated the whites and finally sued for peace with Poland. The peace treaty of Riga (1921) split both Ukraine and Belarus between Poland and Russia. The Ukrainian government went into exile as Russia turned Ukraine into a communist republic which in 1922 dutifully joined the newly born Soviet Union. So Ukraine was independent only for 3 years. The good news is that the Soviet Union recognized the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian cultural traditions. The bad news is that the Soviet Union relocated a lot of Russians to Ukraine, and that's why eastern Ukraine today is mostly ethnic Russian. (The other bad news is that the communist policies of the Soviet Union caused the great famine of 1932-34 that killed millions of Ukrainians). Ukraine was born twice: first during the mess of the Russian Revolution and then during the mess of the collapse of the Soviet Union. If it survives, it will be one of the many countries born out of the disintegration of an empire: Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia are examples of countries that never existed before the Austrian empire disintegrated, and Lebanon is a good example of a country that never existed before the disintegration of the Ottoman empire, and Pakistan and Indonesia are examples of countries that never existed before the disintegration of the British and Dutch empires (just like most of Africa). After World War II Ukraine expanded a bit to the west and in 1954 Soviet leader Khrushev gifted Crimea to Ukraine, despite the fact that 75% of its population was ethnic Russians. At the time that gift was meaningless because Ukraine was part of the same Soviet Union as Russia. Ukraine over the centuries (click to enlarge the pictures):

- Opinion: Does that mean that Ukraine does not have the right to exist? It depends on how you feel about all the peoples who don't have their own country: the Palestinians are the most famous, but also the Kurds (split among Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran), the Tibetans (occupied by China), the people of Western Sahara (occupied by Morocco), the Catalans in Spain and so on. It is always a thorny issue. At the end of World War I several new countries were created by the disintegration of the Austrian and Ottoman empires, like Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Iraq. When the Spanish empire collapsed in the 19th century, a lot of countries were created in Latin America that had never existed before, from Mexico to Argentina. When the British empire collapsed after World War II,

several countries were created that never existed before, like Pakistan and most African countries. When the Dutch Empire collapsed, Indonesia was created, a country that never existed before. What Putin says (that Ukraine was never a country) is (mostly) historically correct, but ideologically debatable: he is basically saying that multi-ethnic colonial empires should not disintegrate, and that ethnic groups are not entitled to their own state. Obviously every country was born at one point or another: Russia didn't exist before it was created by Ivan IV.

- Putin claims that Crimea was always Russian and was given to Ukraine by the Soviet Union as a purely administrative fact: almost true. Crimea wasn't "always" Russian. It all depends how far back you want to go: after many wars against the khanate that ruled Crime for centuries, Russia finally annexed Crimea in 1783, and there was a famous war the Russian empire and the Ottoman empire in 1853 over Crimea (why famous? because it was a sort of "world war" with several European powers involved). Up until then Crimea was mainly populated by Tatars, a Turkic-speaking ethnic group descended from the Mongols. In the following decades Russia proceeded to colonize Crimea: Russians, Ukrainians, Germans and Poles were given land in Crimea. The Tatars became a minority and were almost completely eliminated during World War II when about 200,000 were deported by Stalin to Siberia. In 1954 the Soviet Union, which ruled both Russia and Ukraine, moved Crimea from Russia to Ukraine. So if you start from 1783, and ignore the fact that Crimea was stolen from the Tatars, Putin is right.

- Opinion: Putin fundamentally does not understand Ukraine. Putin made a big mistake in 2012 when he gave a speech in Kiev in which he told the Ukrainians that Russians and Ukrainians are one people. That offended many Ukrainians and two years later the Ukrainians revolted against their pro-Russian president. Another mistake was to support Yanukovych when he ran for president in 2010. There were several well-known pro-Russia politicians and Putin chose to support Yanukovych who was widely despised in the west of Ukraine because of the rigged elections of October 2004 (the cause of the first "Orange revolution"). Yanukovych did win the 2010 election but then had to put his opponent Yulia Tymoshenko in prison (October 2011). Then Putin in 2014 made another mistake when he seized Crimea and de facto Donbass: he removed four million pro-Russian voters so now the majority of Ukraine's voters are anti-Russians, no matter who runs for president. Then in 2021 Putin published the essay "On the Historical Unity of Russia and Ukraine" that blamed the existence of Ukraine on a Western conspiracy, which of course insulted all Ukrainians who haven't seen any such Western conspiracy (most Ukrainians have seen the opposite: Western disinterest for Ukraine). It appears that he has made another mistake in 2022 thinking that Ukrainians would not defend their country or even that they would welcome the Russian troops as "liberators". Putin de facto united Ukraine, a country that previously was bitterly divided in pro-Russia and anti-Russia camps: even the ethnic Russians of Ukraine are now fighting against their Russian "brothers".

- Opinion: Ukraine is better off without Crimea, and perhaps even without Donbass. Ukraine has two big internal problems: the divisions between western and eastern Ukrainians, and rampant corruption. By stealing Crimea and now Donbass, Russia has removed millions of ethnic Russians from Ukraine. Russia may have helped solve one of Ukraine's two big internal problems, by making Ukraine more western-leaning than ever. It could be that this war will also help alleviate the other endemic problem of Ukraine: corruption. Ernst & Young ranks Ukraine amongst the most-corrupt nations of the world. The only country in Europe that is more corrupted than Ukraine is Russia. Zelenskyy, who was elected to fight corruption, he has been slow to make progress on fighting corruption precisely because of the Russian threat, that constituted a graver danger for the nation and for himself personally. The oligarchs have been lining up behind Zelensky because they realize that a puppet regime installed by Putin would mean that the Russian oligarchs (Putin's mafia) would replace them. Better to be poorer oligarchs in an independent Ukraine than be nobody in a Ukraine controlled by Putin's mafia. People like Rinat Akhmetov and Vadim Novinsky (who traveled to the frontline city of Mariupol to stir up anti-Russian sentiment), Ihor Kolomoyskyi (now disgraced but a former supporter of Zelenskyy and the original financial supporter of the neofascist Azov militia), Viktor Pinchuk (a major donor of the Clinton Foundation in the old days), and Petro Poroshenko himself, who was president of Ukraine before Zelenskyy defeated him, are nationalist out of personal interest and likely to be more malleable if Ukraine remains independent, having realizes what they have to lose.

- Opinion: Crimea will come back to haunt Russia. If it is ok for Russia to regain Crimea on the basis that it has been Russian for two centuries, then it is ok for Finland to demand the return of Karelia, stolen by the Soviet Union in 1940, and for Japan to demand the return of the the Kuril islands, that were Japanese until 1945, and for Germany

to demand the return of Kaliningrad, which used to be the German city of Koenigsberg until 1945. Even China could claim some territories that have been traditionally Chinese until the Soviet Union invaded them: the east bank of the Zeya River, for example.

- Putin claims that the revolution of 2014 in Ukraine was a coup: false. In 2014 the events that overthrew Ukraine's president Yanukovych were not a coup at all. Following mass demostrations (started in November 2013 by a Facebook post by investigative journalist Mustafa Nayyem after president Yanukovych, under Russian pressure, decided not to sign a free trade agreement with the European Union), in February 2014 the Ukrainian parliament voted to remove Yanukovych from power (the vote was 328 to 0). A coup is carried out by either the military or the police, by someone with guns. The military did not join the protests. The police actually fought the protesters. Yanukovych was convinced to resign and leave the country by international diplomacy, including Russia. The politicians who took over were all elected members of Ukraine's parliament, and they were mostly Russian-speaking Ukrainians, notably the one chosen as temporary president, Oleksandr Turchynov. One month later Russia, taking advantage of the chaos in a divided country where pro-Russian and anti-Russian groups were shooting each other, invaded and annexed Ukraine's Crimea. Three months later, in May, another ethnic Russian, Petro Poroshenko, won presidential elections. So it's hard to claim that there was a coup in 2014 or that the Russian-speaking people of Ukraine were targeted by such a coup: most of the protagonists of this revolution were Russian-speaking Ukrainians. It is true that initially the European Union had agreed with Russia on a plan to keep Yanukovych in power, but the European Union does not control the will of the Ukrainian people. What certainly irked Putin was that the revolution happened during the Winter Olympic Games that were being held in Sochi, Russia. Putin had invested a lot of political capital in those games (7-23 February). The revolution in Ukraine stole the limelight from his Sochi games: the deadliest clashes in Ukraine took place on 18-20 February.

- Opinion: The Ukrainians hate Putin, not Russia. Putin is "the" problem. If Russia were ruled by a more appealing leader, or quite simply if Russia were a regular democracy, the Ukrainians may be more willing to federate with Russia, the same way that Italians federated with France in the European Union. This is true also of ethnic Russians in Ukraine. They have more freedom as Ukrainian than they would have as Russians. The Russians of Crimea, who are now part of Russia, have lost all their freedom. This is enough for all Ukrainians to be wary of Putin. If Putin truly wants Russia and Ukraine to unite, all he has to do is to resign. If he disappears (forever), there's a good chance that the two nations will reunite. The longer he remains in power the more likely that the rift becomes irreversible.

- Putin complains that NATO repeatedly betrayed its agreements with Russia: true. Putin points out NATO's promise never to enlarge after the fall of the Soviet Union. While that was never put in writing, there are lots of documents (see the National Security Archive at George Washington University) that show how Western leaders misled the Russians to believe that a promise had been made. In exchange for the Soviet Union's acceptance of German reunification (the "2+4 Treaty), the West verbally promised that there would be no NATO enlargement to the east. Notably, in February 1990 the US secretary of state James Baker said so to Russia's foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze during the "Open Skies" conference in Ottawa and to Gorbachev himself during a visit to Russia. Gorbachev is often quoted as saying: "The topic of NATO expansion was not discussed at all, and it wasn't brought up in those years", but the notes taken by the diplomats who attended those conversations prove otherwise. The discussion about possible NATO expansions was never raised in the following years because Russia assumed that the matter had been settled in 1990. In 1997 Yeltsin's Russia gladly signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act. Two years later NATO admitted Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary in clear violation of the spirit of all previous conversations. Nonetheless, in 2001 Putin's Russia helped the USA invade Afghanistan in retaliation for Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks. In 2002 Putin's Russia agreed to set up a joint consultative council with NATO. Two years later NATO underwent the largest expansion in its history, admitting seven more Eastern European countries, including the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania which had been part of the Soviet Union. Clearly, for more than a decade Russia had offered the olive branch and NATO had taken advantage of it to carry out actions that surrounded Russia. This enlargement of NATO may also be personal for Putin. Putin is a "street punk" as Berezovsky once put it, but his word is worth something: he promised Yeltsin not go to after him, and he never did. So it is likely that Putin personally resents that NATO broke its promise to him. Putin's Russia learned again not to

trust the word of the USA in 2002 when the USA asked Russia to support United Nations resolution 1441 to give Iraq an ultimatum. That resolution never authorized the use of force, but four months later the USA used it as the legal justification for a full-scale invasion of Iraq. In 2008 the USA accused Russia of invading Georgia but every observer agreed that it was Georgia that started that war, and of course Putin too knows so, hence he knows that the USA lied about it. In 2011 the USA got Russia's approval to enforce a "no fly zone" over Libya during the revolt against dictator Qaddafi. NATO promised not to bomb Libya. Sure enough NATO bombed Libya and Qaddafi was assassinated. That was the last straw: since then Putin has seen every action and statement of the USA with the eyes of someone who has been repeatedly cheated. Incidentally, it is false that the USA engineered the disintegration of the Soviet Union, another common Putin complaint. George H Bush was president at the time and he tried to convince the leaders of Ukraine and other republics (except the Baltic ones) to remain federated with Russia. The USA was obviously worried of chaos and nuclear proliferation. Putin's own ascent owes something to the West because it was Western investigations that caused the demise of the Yeltsin "family": first the Mabetex scandal and then the discovery of a bank account at the Bank of New York owned by the Yeltsin family used for money-laundering operations linked to the Russian mafia.

- Opinion: Does that mean that Ukraine should comply with those unwritten 1990 agreements between NATO and Russia? No, of couse no: neither NATO nor Russia asked the Ukrainian people. Ukraine was not treated like a nation: it was treated like the feud accidentally inherited by Leonid Kravchuk, the former head of Soviet Ukraine. NATO and Russia negotiated directly and whatever they decided was never approved by the Ukrainian people or by a democratically elected parliament. The only referendum granted to the Ukrainian people was a referendum on whether to secede from the Soviet Union (in december 1991). Overwhelmingly they voted to secede. But nobody asked them "are you in favor of the unwritten by verbally agreed decision that Ukraine should never join NATO"? Ditto for all the other eastern European countries that decided to join NATO after they truly became democratic and their governments truly represented the will of the people. Any agreement (verbal or written) between NATO and Russia about other countries that did not involve legitimate representatives of those countries is null and void. Imagine if France and Brazil negotiated the future of Sri Lanka: would Sri Lanka comply with whatever was decided by France and Brazil about its future? The Russians are right to feel that the USA didn't keep its promise, but the Ukrainians are right to ignore whatever was decided about their country without consulting them.

- Putin claims that the West uses a double standard when it judges Russia's actions: true. In 1999 NATO had bombed Serbia, which used to be a satellite of the Soviet Union: the problem is that Serbia had not attacked any NATO country, so there was no legal justification for NATO to attack Serbia. Not only that: NATO extracted a piece of Serbia, Kosovo, and declared it independent. On the other hand, nobody in NATO defends the right of Catalonia to declare independence from Spain: the leaders of the independence movement were arrested and Spain never granted a referendum on Catalonia's independence. When Russia carries out similar actions in Georgia and Ukraine, the West is outraged. Russians are right to call out the West's hypocrisy. Besides hypocrisy there is also incompetence: the West created the country of South Sudan which has been engulfed in a civil war since then, the West has "liberated" Iraq causing instability that led to ISIS and turned Iraq into a client state of Iran, the West supported the revolutions in Syria and Libya that have destroyed those countries, and so on. Viewed from Russia, NATO is causing problems everywhere it goes.

- Putin claims that his invasion of Ukraine is to prevent Ukraine from ever joining NATO: hard to believe. There was no chance of Ukraine being accepted in NATO even if Ukraine applied (it never did). It is true that, after Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine's government has often spoken of joining NATO, but as recently as June 2021 NATO's secretary general Jens Stoltenberg gave Zelenskyy no hopes that Ukraine could join NATO any time soon and in September 2021 Zelenskyy met with US president Joe Biden in Washington but again he got no hope of Ukraine becoming a NATO member. So there was no urgency on Russia's side to stop Ukraine now: Ukraine was not going anywhere any time soon. Even the chances of Ukraine joining the European Union were very low because of the rampant corruption in Ukraine and general popular opposition to further expanding a union that already has so many problems (especially after Brexit). It would have taken at least a decade. Obviously Putin knew that attacking Ukraine would increase NATO presence, not decrease it, and increase, not decrease, support of Ukraine within the European Union. Ironically, it is Putin's invasion of Ukraine

that may lead to the first expansion of NATO in more than a decade. Sweden and Finland are ostensibly neutral and neither country is a NATO member, but they regularly join Denmark, Iceland and Norway in military exercises (three founding members of NATO) and in 2014 Sweden woke up to a Russian submarine incursion. Sweden fears that Russia could grab the island of Gotland, strategically located between Kaliningrad and Sweden, and deploy missile systems that could block access to the Baltic nations. The chances that Sweden and Finland join NATO just skyrocketed.

- Putin claims that NATO has deployed missiles near Russia whereas Russia does not have any missiles near Western countries, notably the USA: false. There's a difference between defensive missiles and offensive missiles. Defensive missiles need to be placed in the territory that they are meant to defend. These are the ones that Putin doesn't like: the missiles that defend the Baltic states and Eastern Europe. Offensive missiles, unfortunately, can be based anywhere because they can travel long distances at supersonic speed with their nuclear loads. The actual distance makes no difference in the age of long-range missiles: Russian missiles can hit the USA in ten minutes even if launched from far away. While not publicized by Western media, the governments of Eastern Europe were alarmed to see that in 2015 and 2016 Russian warships launched SS-N-30 Kalibr cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea into Syria: there was no need for Russia to deploy those long-range missiles in Syria itself. These cruise missiles, similar to the Tomahawk cruise missiles of the USA, don't need to be deployed near the borders of Eastern Europe in order to reach most of Europe. In any event, Russia has missile bases in Vilyuchinsk (a ballistic missile submarine base), very close to Alaska. The distance (as the missile flies) between Russia and Alaska is 82 kms. Russia has been deploying anti-aircraft missile systems on the Kamchatka Peninsula since at least 2015 (Putin complains that NATO deployed similar anti-aircraft missiles in the Baltic Republics). Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014 clearly alarmed Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia (three nations that used to be part of the Soviet Union just like Ukraine). At the time NATO had not deployed any air defense in these Baltic states. Furthermore, in November 2016 Russia announced the deployment of Bastion missiles in Kaliningrad, a tiny Russian enclave between Poland and Lithuania: those missiles are capable of firing supersonic Oniks cruise missiles with a range of 500 kms, enough to strike Poland's capital and even Sweden's capital, besides the Baltic nations, and promised the deployment of nuclear-capable Iskander tactical ballistic missiles and S-400 air defence missile systems to Kaliningrad. In 2017 Russia held its massive quadrennial Zapad military exercise and in 2019 the Russian navy staged its large-scale Ocean Shield exercise, further alarming its former satellite nations. In 2017 Russia deployed the 9M729 missile in Kaliningrad in violation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty, which restricts the range of missiles, signed by the Soviet Union and the USA in December 1987. In February 2018 Russia announced that it had deployed the nuclear-capable Iskander missiles to Kaliningrad, and in October 2018 satellite imagery from Israel's ImageSat International showed the extent of Russia's military buildup in Kaliningrad. Incidentally, all the Russian missiles aimed at Ukraine may as well hit Turkey, which is a NATO member. Meanwhile, the USA had repeatedly accused Russia of violating the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty. In February 2019 both (both) the USA and Russia suspended the treaty. This is one of the treaties that Putin accuses the USA of violating, but the truth is that Russia violated it first and in any case Russia withdrew from it just like the USA did. Incidentally, in 2005 Putin had already criticized the treaty as unfair because it covered only the USA and Russia and left China and any other nation free to deploy long-range missiles (in fact, both China and North Korea have done so, therefore Putin was actually right on withdrawing from that treaty). So what has NATO deployed in Eastern Europe and the Baltic nations that upsets Russia so much? Very little, actually. Russia was very angry when in 2017 the USA deployed a battery of Patriot long-range anti-aircraft missiles in Lithuania but it was there only for NATO wargames. In September 2019 Poland asked the USA for a permanent US military base in Poland, but that was in response to the Russian military buildup in Kaliningrad, and that base still doesn't exist. In January 2020 NATO conducted its largest exercise in 25 years, but, again, that followed Russia's Zapad and Ocean Shield exercises. Ironically, the only serious missiles deployed in the Baltic nations are not NATO missiles: in October 2021 Estonia purchased from Israel the Blue Spear cruise missile, which cannot hit any major Russian city but could cut the sea trade route connecting St Petersburg with Kaliningrad (which in theory could starve the 400,000-person city). It is true that Russia has intercepted hundreds of NATO military planes over the Black Sea and the Baltic regions, and that's certainly a provocation (how would the USA react if Russian planes flew over the

Gulf of Mexico or off the California coast?) Russia is no less aggressive in the Far East: in 2016 Russia stationed both the Bal and the Bastion missile systems on two of the southernmost Kuril islands, which are claimed by Japan (Japan and the Soviet Union never signed a peace treaty after the end of World War II because the Soviet Union refused to return the Kurils to Japan, so technically Japan and Russia are still at war today); in December 2020 Russian defense ministry's Zvezda TV station announced that Russia had deployed S-300V4 missiles on an island of the Kuril islands; in February 2021 the same organ announced that its S400 missiles were on combat duty in the island of Sakhalin; and finally, in December 2021, Russia's defense ministry posted a video of the Bastion missile system being deployed in Matua, in the middle of the Kuril islands. This has been happening while Japan has not added a single missile to its defenses. So in reality Russia is guilty of doing exactly what Putin accuses NATO of doing.

- Opinion: More likely, Putin's real concern was not NATO expansion but a prosperous and free Ukraine, that could even become a destination for Russian emigrants. What was indeed going to happen soon was a European-funded economic program to help the Ukrainian economy. That could be the prospect that truly scared Putin: a democratic and prosperous Ukraine right at the border with Russia and with a sizable Russian-speaking population. Today, the worst publicity for Putin is the fact that the ethnic Russians who live in Lithuania and Estonia (about one third of the population in each of these two Baltic countries) are much richer than the ones inside Russia: GDP per capita in Lithuania is about $20,000 and in Estonia $23,000 compared with Russia's $10,000. The last thing that Putin wants to see is that the ethnic Russians in Ukraine get richer than the Russians across the border in Russia.

- Opinion: If he gets away with it, Putin will not stop with Ukraine. Of course, it all depends on what Putin's real motive is, but, if he is worried about having a prosperous and democratic Ukraine next to Russia, he will be equally wary of a prosperous and democratic Romania or Poland once Ukraine becomes part of the Russian empire.

- Opinion: The mother of all problems in Europe is that Russia views Europe as a hostage. In the event of war with the USA, Russia sees itself losing unless it holds Europe hostage. Russia thinks (perhaps correctly) that the main condition of its own security is that Europe be insecure. Russia wants the fundamental right to destroy Europe with its nuclear missiles, and, actually, even without using nuclear weapons: it just wants military superiority in Europe as a condition for its own security. Russia is nothing but a bigger version of North Korea: North Korea holds South Korea and Japan hostage the same way Russia holds Europe hostage. When in 2008 (a few months after Russia invaded Georgia) the USA announced the intention of building missile defenses in Poland and Czechia (10 radars and interceptors), Russia reacted as if it had been attacked: those defense systems (ostensibly to defend from Iranian missiles) made it impossible for Russia to hold the European countries hostage. In 2009 US president Obama gave in to Russian pressures and canceled the plan. That was despite the fact that evidence had surfaced of Russia deploying tactical nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad (Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, August 2008: "According to the information to which we have access, there are already tactical nuclear weapons in the Kaliningrad area - They are located both at and in the vicinity of units belonging to the Russia fleet").

- Opinion: The other cause of Russia's insecurity is that nobody wants to be ruled by Putin's Russia just like nobody wanted to be ruled by the Soviet Union. Nobody has tried to invade any Russian territory since the end of World War II: the territories that the Soviet Union lost were lost for a simple reason, that those people didn't want to be ruled by Russia. Nobody stole Estonia, Georgia or Kazakhstan from Russia: it's those people who don't want to be ruled by Russia. It is false that the USA engineered the democratization of Poland or Romania: the Polish and the Romanians got rid of communism by themselves, and saw Russians as the oppressor. Russia's problem is that none of its neighbors trusts Russia the way Europeans and the Japanese trust the USA. The fact that Russia is ruled by Putin makes it even worse: who wants Putin as president? Very few outside Russia. There might be more neofascist Fox News viewers in the USA who like Putin than people in the entire Eastern Europe who like Putin.

- Putin wants to "de-nazify" Ukraine. Putin is creating a problem that he claims to be solving. Ukraine does have a far-right neo-nazi group, but those are precisely the ones who voted against the current president, Zelensky, and his government. Zelensky is a Jew who got elected president of a Christian country with 73% of the vote: it's unlikely you'll see this in your lifetime again, a Jew winning 73% of the vote in a Christian or Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu country. Zelensky won because the far-right has progressively lost votes: in 2012 it won 10.4% of the

popular vote, but only 6% in 2014 and 2% in 2019. By comparison, the far-right Donald Trump won 46% of the vote both in 2016 and in 2020. The far-right party Svoboda holds one seat in the Ukrainian parliament, whereas Trump supporters hold 100s of seats in the US congress. The most famous neo-nazi militia in Ukraine, the Azov battalion, founded by white supremacists like Andriy Biletsky, became heroes when in 2014 they fought against Putin's army. The Russian occupation of Donbass has simply provided this neo-nazi militia for an opportunity to gain popular support. Nonetheless, Azov has one thousand soldiers compared with 50,000 Ukrainian national guards and 250,000 regular Ukrainian soldiers. The risk is that Putin's new invasion of Ukraine under the pretense of "de-nazify" Ukraine will turn into a self-fulfilling prophesy because it will make the militias more powerful and respected. That said, Putin is calling for the "denazification" of Ukraine simply because Russians think of "nazists" as threats to the existence of Russia. Most Russians can't clearly distinguish between Hitler's nazism and their own regime at the time, Stalinism. The clear distinction is that nazist germany attacked communism Russia, and that's the distinction between nazism and communism that is clear to all Russians. Most of Russia's news coverage has been claiming for years that Russia is at war against fascists and nazists. Todd Snyder has called it "schizofascism": the fascist who accuses the antifascist of being fascist. Russian fascists base their fascist theories and activities on the premise that Russia is under attack by foreign fascists. Most Russians are not be able to define what is a "fascist" (Russia has always been ruled by czars, autocrats and dictators, except for the brief Yeltsin years): the term "fascist" is understood to refer to any foreign enemy of Russia, regardless of their ideology. Therefore any democrat is a fascist for the Russian public. This is one thing that will surprise you if you discuss politics with Russians: the moment you mention a democratic movement, they will call it "fascist" precisely because it is democratic (i.e. an "enemy" of Russia). It is true that there are nazists in Ukraine but the accusation sounds funny when it comes from a man like Putin who has repeatedly hailed as a saint Vladimir I the Great, prince of Novgorod and later of Kiev, because Vladimir I converted Russia to Christianity (by 980 he had conquered most of European Russia, Ukraine and Belarus). Putin forgets to mention that Vladimir was open to all religions, but opted against Islam because Islam forbade alcohol (vodka!), Vladimir married a Christian woman (the sister of the Byzantine emperor) against her will as a prize for helping Byzantium put down a rebellion, and that Vladimir had many wives and (literally) hundreds of concubines throughout his life. But this is Putin's role model: for him Vladimir is the man who created Russia and therefore the ultimate anti-fascist. Viewed from the West, Ukraine is vastly more democratic than Russia, and Putin's Russia should first de-nazify itself. The two views are difficult to reconcile.

- Biden argues that a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia would mean World War III: probably false. Who is going to fight on Russia's side? Putin's Russia has no friends. World War II was a "world" war (not just one of the many European wars of past centuries) because Japan joined Germany and Italy, and attacked the USA which then joined the war too. Imagining a third "world" war means assuming that China (Russia's only friend outside Europe) will attack the USA if the USA attacks Russia in Europe, or that Japan will attack Russia. Besides the fact that there is no defense pact between China and Russia, it is hard to imagine what China would gain from joining such a war. The chances of annexing Taiwan would be even lower in a military conflict with the USA than they would be in a one-on-one with Taiwan. Japan has no offensive army and his population is strongly opposed to any kind of war, let alone an invasion of Russia. In reality, a US direct attack on Russia would "only" be a war between NATO and Russia. That's still pretty scary, given that NATO has thousands of nuclear bombs and so does Russia, although NATO's goal would be limited to freeing Ukraine (or protecting western Ukraine).

- Opinion: Why was the USA so sure that Putin had already decided to invade Ukraine even though all members of Putin's government kept repeating that Russia had no such intention? The CIA is not exactly impeccable (remember Saddam's weapons of mass destruction? remember how badly the CIA assessed Afghanistan's willingness to fight the Taliban?) but this time it was right on target: no matter how often the Russians denied any intention of invading Ukraine, the USA kept insisting that the decision had already been taken. There are three options: 1. US surveillance of Russia is so good that it can "hear" what Putin says; 2. US has good spies at the Kremlin; 3. Someone who knew Putin's plans told the USA. The first and second options are unrealistic because a) Russia has excellent cyberwarfare capabilities; and b) a "rat" is unlikely to survive in Putin's circle given Russia's top-notch counter-intelligence services (and the terror regime created by Putin). The third option is the most

realistic: Putin told someone outside Russia and that someone told the USA. Who knew of Putin's plans outside the Kremlin? China's president Xi is my favorite suspect. (It would be ironic if Putin not only told Xi but even encouraged Xi to invade Taiwan in order to split Western attention, and Xi told Putin "ok" and then Xi left Putin alone and instead called Biden to give him the details. This would be a strategic masterpiece by Xi.)

- Putin has lost his mind: possible. Much speculation is going into Putin's mental health. Too much of this invasion sounds irrational for a man like Putin who has been known for being an astute calculator. Merkel had a phone conversation with Putin in 2014. She speaks Russian and he speaks German: he was a KGB man in Eastern Germany when Merkel was living under Russian occupation there. Therefore they understood each other very well. Merkel later reported to Obama that Putin was "living in another world". One wonders if that was the beginning of a serious deterioration in Putin's ability to judge what was going on in the world. After all, Putin has been increasingly isolated in his palaces and in his dacia, surrounded by people who are too afraid of contradicting him and therefore feed him the stories he wants to hear. Both Macron and the Finnish president talk of a different, paranoid Putin. The images of Putin meeting with Macron and even with his own generals at that very long table speak allegorically to his isolation and his paranoia. Is he afraid of catching covid? Is he afraid of an assassination? The video of the security council meeting of February 2022 was perhaps meant to discourage dissent but ended up showing divisions: Sergey Naryshkin, head of a spy agency, dared suggest negotiations with the West, and Valentina Matviyenko, chairman of the federation council, was visibly uncomfortable. Since the protests of 2012, Putin has progressively shrunk the circle of advisors. Now he listens only to the hard-line nationalists, like his former bodyguard (Putin is the moderate among them). It seems like both defense and foreign ministry were caught off guard by the invasion of Ukraine. Very few people knew Putin's real intentions. It seems that he trusts only two or three people with his real plans. He must also be spooked that Biden knew so well his plans. In fact, it sounds like Biden knew more about Putin's plans than Putin's own people. For years there have been rumors that Putin is obsessively re-watching the video of the humiliating assassination of Libya's dictator Qaddafi in 2011. Putin says he is motivated by NATO's expansion but there has been no NATO expansion in many years and no NATO expansion was planned. On the other hand, there have been "color" revolutions in almost all the former Soviet republics. Is it a coincidence that Putin prepared for an invasion of Ukraine right after he sent troops to protect Belarus' dictator and Kazakhstan's dictator from popular revolts? Maybe Putin invaded Ukraine because he wanted to stop the contagion: after Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus, the contagion could spread inside Russia itself. Maybe Putin's invasion of Ukraine is simply about his own survival. If he falls, he has nowhere to go. He may sense that many of the people around him (politicians, generals and oligarchs) would be happy to replace him with someone younger and less megalomaniac. Putin's problem today is that he can't find anyone whom he could trust the way Yeltsin trusted him in 1999 when Putin promised never to go after him. Putin senses that all the people around him could betray him, jail him or even kill him.

- Opinion: The timing of the invasion has puzzled many observers. 1. Preparations for the invasion of Ukraine began in 2021 when Putin lost two key allies. First, it became clear that Trump's claims of electoral fraud were not going to help him regain the White House. Basically, Putin started planning the invasion when he realized that his buddy Trump was gone forever. Trump had nonetheless served an important purpose for Putin: by dividing the Republican Party over Russia, and by weakening NATO, Trump had destroyed the deterrent to such an invasion. Before Trump, the Republican Party was united and it was a "hawk" party in foreign policy. The deterrent was very high. After Trump's work to implode the Republican Party from the inside and to weaken Western alliances, Putin felt empowered instead of deterred. Putin was counting on Trump to pull the USA out of NATO. Don't trust my words on this: trust John Bolton (not exactly a liberal) who is convinced that Trump was going to withdraw the USA from NATO in his second term (see Bolton's speech). Putin's original plan was probably to wait for Trump to withdraw from NATO and then to attack Ukraine and possibly the Baltic states. When it became obvious that there will be no second Trump term, Putin decided to act. Second, in May 2021 Ukraine arrested Viktor Medvedchuk, the leader of Ukraine's main pro-Russia party who owned three pro-Russia TV stations. Putin is the godfather of his daughter. If Putin overthrows Zelenskyy, he is likely to appoint Medvedchuk as the new president of a pro-Russian Ukraine. 2. The other international event that may have increased Putin's fervor for an immediate invasion was the retirement of German chancellor Angela Merkel. Putin may have incorrectly assumed that her successor, Olaf

Scholz, who leads a coalition government full of pacifists (his own social democrats and the "greens"), would be reluctant to defend Ukraine the way Merkel would have. 3. Putin may have mis-read the withdrawal of the USA from the Islamic world (withdrawal from Iraq, indifference towards Syria and Libya, withdrawal from Afghanistan). The botched US withdrawal from Afghanistan actually sends a different message: that the USA is no longer distracted by the mess in the Islamic world, so in theory more likely to react to European events. 4. Maybe Putin viewed Europe as exhausted by the covid pandemic with zero appetite for another economic crisis, and at the same time Putin is facing one of the worst covid death tolls in the world and needed a distraction.

- Opinion: I wonder if the Russian soldiers knew what they were getting into. There must be a reason if Putin doesn't want the Russian public to hear about the war (coverage is restricted to the point that Ukrainian citizens cannot convince relatives inside Russia that they are being bombed by Russian troops). Western media keep replaying images of destroyed buildings and dead bodies, but so far it looks like the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been much less lethal than the US invasion of Iraq in 2003: no "shock and awe", but instead a slow and almost reluctant advance: is it a sign that Russian soldiers are as surprised as us?

- Opinion: The West just invented a new weapon of mass destruction: global sanctions on a scale never seen before. Almost every major war introduced a new weapon: the machine gun in the US Civil War, the airplane in World War I, the atomic bomb in World War II, drones in the Islamic wars of the USA, and cyberwarfare in the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. The global sanctions of March 2022 will be remembered as a new type of weapon of mass destruction, except that this is not a weapon that kills people but a weapon that kills economies. This is not genocide but "econo-cide". Every weapon, once invented, it spreads: other nations race to develop the same weapon. Machine guns are now as common as pistols, every major country has an air force, several countries have a stock of nuclear bombs, and military drones are already everywhere. In this case however the econocide cannot be easily duplicated by nations that don't control the flow of capital. Rather than trying to develop a similar "econo-cide", the rivals of the West will try to decouple their economy from the West. Every regime that wants to protect itself from Western sanctions will be motivated to get rid of ties to Western banks (and Western technology).

- Opinion: The culture war is very wrong. The West has unleashed an unprecedented culture war against all Russians. Many US entities are severing ties with their Russian partners: the Metropolitan Opera canceled the engagements of Russian soprano Anna Netrebk because she refused to repudiate the invasion of Ukraine (needless to say, the Metropolitan Opera doesn't have to fear Putin's retaliation the way Netrebk would have to). Ireland canceled the performance by the Royal Moscow Ballet and Britain canceled the performances of the Russian State Ballet of Siberia and of the Bolshoi Ballet (note that these ballets comprise Russians, Ukrainians, Belarussians and even Polish dancers). An Italian university has suspended a course on Dostoevskij and Italy's famous opera theater La Scala has fired conductor Valery Gergiev. Eurovision, FIFA and the Paralympic Games have banned Russian singers, soccer teams and even disabled athletes from participating in their competitions. McDonald's, Starbucks and Coca-Cola have shut their shops. Disney and Warner are not showing their movies in Russia. Even digital Russians are being punished: EA Sports removed the Russian national team and Russian clubs from its popular soccer videogames. And, comically, some Western supermarkets have removed Russian vodka from their shelves. Meanwhile, European countries keep buying Russian oil and gas. These boycotts are not only exaggerated but even counterproductive. It is precisely by inviting Russians to the West that Russian citizens could appreciate the level of alarm and outrage outside Russia. We are forgetting the other victims of this war: the Russians themselves.

- Opinion: Iran and Venezuela suddenly look less like enemies and more like opportunities. The reason why Russia became so important in oil production is that the oil production of these two oil giants has been crippled by US sanctions. If the USA reaches some kind of deal with Iran and Venezuela, the importance of Russian oil will greatly diminish.

- Opinion: The European Union is finally waking up. During covid the European Union suddenly realized that it depended on China for medical supplies, even for face masks. Now the European Union finally wakes up to the fact that it depends on Russia for oil and gas, especially thanks to its suicidal anti-nuclear policies. (See **The Anti-nuclear Movement is Putin's Secret Weapon against Europe**). Russia is a small economy (smaller than Italy's)

that makes money by selling oil and gas to Europe and then invests all the money in weapons which it then uses to threaten Europe. The European Union is also belatedly waking up to the fact that it is vulnerable to Russian propaganda, in particular to cyberwarfare. Brexit happened mainly because of Russian trolls and bots that influenced British public opinion. Hopefully, the European Union will also wake up to the fact that it cannot count on the USA to defend it, that the USA (whether ruled by an honest man like Obama or by a scumbag traitor like Trump) is a different country, a country more focused on China than on Russia. Germany has decided to increase to 2% the share of GDP that it will spend on defense. About time. And countries like Italy and Spain are totally unprotected.

- Opinion: China's role is not clear. On one hand it sounds like China knew exactly what Putin was going to do. Putin attended the Winter Olympics in Beijing and spoke with China's president Xi. It would be shocking if Putin lied to Xi. It is likely that Putin told Xi what he was going to do, and simply promised to wait until the end of the games. On the other hand, before the invasion, China kept accusing the USA of creating panic over nothing, which sounds like China didn't know Putin's intentions. Confusing. China did not side with Russia at the United Nations: it abstained, just like India. The only countries that sided with Russia were Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea and Syria. On the other hand, Chinese media are the only media that are faithfully re-broadcasting Russian propaganda. Particularly alarming is the fact that Chinese media repeated what Russia said about chemical and biological weapons. When Russia alleged that the USA was sponsoring Ukraine's chemical and biological weapons labs (which don't exist), China's foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian stated that there are 26 bio-labs in Ukraine managed by the USA, a clear attempt to justify Russia if Russia uses chemical and biological weapons. (Interestingly, the story of the Ukrainian biolabs did not originate in Russia but on right-wing US platforms, notably QAnon followers, later amplified by Tucker Carlson on Fox News, and only later picked up by Russian television). China is benefiting from the crisis because now Russia, having been mostly outlawed from the West, has to sell its goods (mainly natural resources) to China, obviously at a discounted price. Russia's future (until Putin falls) is to become a client state of China, providing China with all the natural resources it needs. The day that Siberia will speak Chinese is closer than ever. The USA doesn't get much out of this war (just a more united NATO), but China does: whatever the conclusion of this invasion, Russia will be poorer, weaker and lonelier. Russia will never be a rival again to China in Central Asia or anywhere in Asia, and eastern Russia itself will gradually fall under the Chinese sphere of influence. Could it be that Xi's real long-term goal is not Taiwan, but Siberia? Imagine China with the vast natural resources of Siberia. Putin made a big mistake when he sold weapons to India and Vietnam, two countries with which China fought wars: it showed to China that Russia is as unreliable as the USA (Russia sold India the S-400 missile systems that India will aim to China and of course Russia knew what India was going to do with them). China probably views Russia as a tactical (short-term) ally whereas the USA is the strategic long-term rival. The USA fears a China-Russia alliance, but maybe China fears a US-Russian alliance against China: Putin is not immortal. In less than 10 years Russia may change dramatically under a new leader. The anti-European and anti-US stances are relics of the Soviet Union, in which Putin was raised, whereas the leader who succeeds Putin is likely to be someone raised outside that state of mind and more inclined to become a partner, not a rival, of the evil West; maybe even an oligarch with villas in the French Riviera. In the long run Russia could become part of the EU and even of NATO (redesigned as an anti-Chinese alliance). That's another thing that the Chinese, who tend to think long term, are probably considering. Chinese trade with Russia rose to $147 billion last year, but that is less than one-tenth of China's total $1.6 trillion in trade with the United States and EU. Today, China's economy is hostage to the West.

- Opinion: There is continuity between tzarist Russia, communist Soviet Union and neofascist Russia. The Soviet Union invaded Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 for reasons similar to Putin's current reasons: to stop a regime that was leaning dangerously towards democracy and the West. The Soviet Union even used the same pretext: that Hungarians and Czechs were "brothers". What we are finding out is that the Russia-West divide was not due to ideology: with or without communism, there's a chronic problem in Europe. Perhaps precisely because of its size, Russia has remained essentially a vast, centrally-controlled, bureaucratic empire. The czars created this system and the Soviet Union only apparently overthrew it: Stalin was a great bureaucrat who rose from the ranks, and Putin was a great bureaucrat who rose from the ranks. There is one notable difference between the Soviet

Union and Russia: the Soviet Union was the second largest economy in the world, whereas Russia's economy is smaller than Italy's (and GDP per capita is one third).

- Opinion: The Soviet Union and Putin's Russia seem to be very different from tzarist Russia but they are actually very similar in one aspect: it is still a colonial empire. There were several European empires. They all collapsed: the Spanish empire collapsed in the 19th century when all the American colonies became independent; the Austrian and Ottoman empires collapsed at the end of World War II, losing their eastern European and Middle-eastern possessions; the British, French and Dutch empires collapsed after World War II when independence movements spread from India to Vietnam, from Algeria to Zimbabwe, from Indonesia to Kenya. Only one of those European colonial empires is left: Russia. When a Russian politician tries to defend the right of Russia to exist as it is, it's like an Austrian politician trying to defend the right of reforming the old Austrian empire that ruled from Spain to the Balkans, or a British polician arguing that Britain is entitled to half of Africa and most of North America. I am sure all empires did something good and that many countries were better off under the British or the French than after independence, but a colonial empire in the 21st century may not make much sense anymore. Putin claims that Ukraine makes no sense but maybe it's Russia that makes no sense.

- Opinion: Yet again, a nuclear power has invaded a country that gave up weapons of mass destruction. Russia invaded Ukraine that gave up nuclear weapons in the 1990s. In 2003 the USA invaded Iraq and deposed Saddam Hussein claiming that he had weapons of mass destruction but in reality the invasion worked precisely because he didn't have them. In 2011 Libya's dictator Qaddafi was overthrown and killed after he voluntarily surrendered his weapons of mass destruction. On the other hand, the USA never even tried to invade or overthrow North Korea's dictator because North Korea has nuclear weapons. China threatens to invade Taiwan because Taiwan gave up its nuclear program in the 1960s. On the other hand, nobody threatens to invade Israel because Israel does have nuclear weapons. Russia's invasion of Ukraine taught the world the same lesson: arm yourself with nuclear weapons or a nuclear power might invade you.

- Opinion: Russia is basically a bigger version of North Korea, a preview of what will happen with North Korea in a decade or so when it starts shooting missiles on Hawaii (and maybe the Bay Area). Europe let an impoverished authoritarian Russia rearm to the point that Russia decided to use those weapons. The USA is letting an impoverished authoritarian North Korea to rearm to the point that...

- So that you don't think i'm a hardcore anti-Russian, see my article on the annexation of Crimea, when i actually sided with Putin: **Why Putin is right again, and why he might lose again**